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ABSTRACT

The French employers federation (MEDEF) has taken the initiative to develop a joint inter-sectoral mechanism for accreditation of occupational competences. The approach analyzes occupations at a more abstract level than the tasks performed within a specific job to facilitate comparison of different occupations from different sectors and allow recognition of competences across sectors. Qualification systems in the transition countries are changing gradually but still firmly rooted in formal education and training systems. Transition from command to market economies has affected these systems and often widened the gap between the worlds of work and education. A qualification mechanism driven by the social partners that promotes trans-sectoral mobility would be an important step in closing the gap. The European Training Foundation has undertaken support activities in the transition countries to develop a common understanding of qualifications, competences, and vocational education and training standards. The project has helped define a common concept of "assessment of competence," identify main principles and best practice in the European Union and partner countries, and develop a road map for development of competence-based assessment systems in partner countries. The MEDEF-initiated mechanism provides an important example of how such a competence-based system could work, but it is still remote from realities of the transition countries. (YLB)

In Focus

Are the social partners in Central and Eastern Europe ready to follow the French example of developing a joint inter-sectoral mechanism for the accreditation of qualifications ?

The French employers federation (MEDEF) has taken the initiative to experiment with the development of a joint inter-sectoral mechanism for the accreditation of occupational competences. Accreditation refers to a process of assessing and recognising the competences that people have developed in different contexts.

Often, most of the knowledge and skills obtained through formal education becomes obsolete within a decade after graduation. People need to keep themselves up to date throughout their careers. Work not only offers particularly important learning opportunities but usually provides a better environment for developing competence, in the sense of the ability to apply one's knowledge, skills and personal qualities. However, since much of this learning is individual and spontaneous and does not belong to a clearly defined plan of learning, recognition becomes much more problematic. There is no control of the learning process as in the formal education system and only the results can be evaluated.

Throughout the world, employers have always recognised the importance of work experience and usually prefer experienced workers to newcomers. However, when a person has experience in a different type of job, or when he or she comes from a completely different sphere of work, it becomes more difficult to assess the value of the experience. With today's rapid economic and technological changes, the boundaries between different sectors have become more vague and subject to constant flux. Career paths are very different from those of a generation ago. Life-long jobs are disappearing and it has become more acceptable to change jobs, employers and sectors. This means that there is also a need among employers to know how to recognise individuals' abilities to perform a different kind of job, in other words, to recognise the relevant experience. It is important to look beyond the curriculum vitae and ascertain the abilities that have been developed.

It is therefore not strange that the development of an inter-sectoral accreditation system has been initiated by employers in order to facilitate the accreditation of competences within and between sectors. Trade unions also have an interest in being involved in such

developments, since they want to ensure that the principles will benefit individuals as well as enterprises.

The fact that this initiative has been taken up by the social partners, independent of the public sector and training providers, is extremely important. It shows that there is a need for a more work-based approach to qualifications. With the development of the knowledge economy, industrial relations are changing and becoming more focused on people and the workplace. Companies and social partners are developing a much stronger interest in human-resources development.

The success of the initiative will depend on the process of bringing together stakeholders from different sectors to agree upon common approaches. The mechanism that has been developed is not in itself the main achievement of the development of this joint inter-sectoral accreditation system. It is one of many existing methods for analysing occupations. The main purpose of the methodology is building confidence across the different sectors. It is important for occupational competences to be more clearly recognizable without being alienated from the core purpose of the occupation or sector involved. There is always the fear of 'atomisation'—the splitting up of occupations into bit-size pieces, with no logical links between them. In such a case, a compromise solution focuses on types of activity and work situations.

Like other methods for occupational analysis, this approach attempts to analyse occupations at a more abstract level than the tasks performed within a specific job. This facilitates the process of comparing different occupations from different sectors and allows the recognition of competences across sectors.

Relevance for transition countries

The need for mechanisms to facilitate greater workforce mobility is universal. The fact that the socio-economic players are the driving force behind such mechanisms will also become more common, as they are best placed to define their own needs.

Qualification systems in transition countries are changing gradually. They are still firmly rooted in the formal

education and training systems, but the transition from command to market economies has deeply affected these systems and has often widened the gap between the worlds of work and education. A qualification mechanism that is driven by the social partners and promotes trans-sectoral mobility would therefore be an important step forward in closing the gap.

To what extent is this important example transferable to the transition countries? In this short article it is not possible to give a comprehensive overview of the developments in each of the countries and I will therefore limit myself to the main principles of relevant support activities of the European Training Foundation in transition countries.

The European Training Foundation (ETF) started its activities in 1995 to assist the reform of the vocational education and training systems in transition. Currently the Foundation works with more than forty countries and territories in Central and Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, the Western Balkans and the New Independent States of the former Soviet Union and Mongolia.

Since its inception, the European Training Foundation has been working on the issues of social partnership and qualification systems. The initial activities played an important role in bringing together stakeholders from different organisations in the partner countries, and facilitating the debate on qualifications. This process helped to develop a common understanding of what we mean by qualifications, competences and vocational education and training standards.

Qualifications are usually based on standards, which specify the competence obtained after a certain training programme or for a certain occupation. The ETF work on standards has helped to reach agreement on a number of key principles for the development of vocational education and training standards that are based on best practice in EU and transition countries.

A breakthrough in this work has been the linking of occupational and training standards. Modern vocational education and training standards cover employment requirements, learning requirements, and assessment requirements.

- The employment requirements define occupational competences.
- The learning requirements translate these competences into learning outcomes that can be used to develop training programmes or learning paths.
- The assessment requirements describe the evidence needed to assess the competence.

If standards are to be relevant to both education/training and work, they must be easily updateable and accessible to all users. The role of the social partners as representatives of the world of work in the standard-setting process is extremely important.

Although there have been many pilot projects to develop new standards, qualification systems are changing only gradually. In many countries, standards are still very bulky documents that are accessible only to those who develop them. Most transition countries have adapted what they had before. The role of the social partners in setting new qualifications is still rather weak and the process of reform is clearly government driven.

Some countries, such as Romania, Estonia and Slovenia, have made a great deal of progress in developing competence-based qualifications. In Romania, an attempt has been made to ensure that this process involves the social partners by setting up a standard development body as a tripartite institution. However, the development of new qualifications is a lengthy, costly process that the social partners are unable and unwilling to sustain by themselves, without strong government participation.

Many institutions have been established in the partner countries to represent labour and management. However, the degree of involvement of enterprises and individuals in these organisations is still quite weak in comparison to EU countries.

The accreditation process of occupational competence covers two main elements: the assessment of a person's competence and the recognition that a person has the competence. The definition of competence-based standards is a first step toward helping the countries to establish more competence-based training systems. The implementation of the standards has led to different approaches to assessment and learning. The European Training Foundation developed a pilot project on standard-based assessment of competence which was aimed at elaborating guidelines for partner countries for the development of (more) competence-based assessment systems.

This project has helped us to define a common concept of "assessment of competence", to identify the main principles and best practice in the EU and partner countries, and to develop a road map for the development of (more) competence-based assessment systems in specific partner countries. The outcomes of this first phase will be published soon in a concept paper on assessment of competence that is designed for experts in assessment in partner countries and a paper that puts forward the pros and cons of competence-based assessment systems for policy- and decision-makers.

The mechanism initiated by MEDEF can provide an important example of how such a competence-based system could work, but it is still remote from the realities of the transition countries.

Arjen Deij, ETF, 11 October 2002

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